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Producing migrant domestic work: Exploring the everyday political economy of Malaysia's 'maid shortage'

Juanita Elias, University of Warwick

Jonathon Louth, University of Adelaide

Abstract

The article considers how the employment of domestic workers by middle class Malaysian households has been thrown into flux by the imposition of bans on the sending of workers by states such as Indonesia and Cambodia, as well as the decline in numbers of women seeking employment as domestic workers in Malaysia and rising employment costs. This article does not seek to focus on the high-level policy negotiations and disputes that have come to characterize systems of temporary return migration for domestic work in Asia, but to focus in on the everyday political economies (of social reproduction, work and everyday agency) that constitute the conditions of possibility within which bilateral disputes and labour agreements between Southeast Asian states take shape. We examine three dimensions of migration for domestic work in Southeast Asia in ways that bring together literatures on everyday life and social reproduction. These interconnected yet distinct dimensions are (a) the relationship between strategies to boost remittances and flows of workers from some of the most impoverished parts of Southeast Asia; (b) the centrality of low cost migrant domestic workers to Malaysian middle class 'success stories', and (c) the day to day production of 'good' worker subjects – a process that is actively and constantly resisted by workers themselves. Through a focus on these dimensions, the article provides important insights into the mechanisms through arenas of everyday life – and the household in particular – are transformed; becoming sites for the ever widening and deepening of the market economy.

Key words: Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, domestic work, migration, everyday life, feminist political economy, social reproduction

Introduction

The large-scale movement of domestic workers within Southeast Asia is largely made up of formal flows of migrant workers employed within return migration systems governed by bilateral labour agreements – sometimes referred to as memorandums of understanding (MOUs). In middle-income Malaysia, the ability to source low paid women workers from neighbouring lower income states has led to a situation in which it is fairly normal for well-to-do households to employ a domestic worker. The normalization of migrant domestic work in middle class Malaysian households reflects, in part, the unwillingness of the state to take

on the socially reproductive activities needed to support increases in women's labour force participation. But it also reflects the symbolic role that employment of domestic workers plays in cultural perceptions of middle-class status and Malaysian visions of economic 'success' more generally. In this article, we explore how the dependency of the Malaysian middle classes on low paid domestic workers has been continually thrown into flux since a June 2009 decision by the government of Indonesia to place an embargo on formalized flows of domestic workers into Malaysia and a later decision in 2011 by the government of Cambodia to enact a similar ban. Whilst domestic worker employment remains widespread in Malaysia, perceptions of a 'maid shortage' has triggered wider cultural anxieties and concerns regarding the perceived 'stalling' of the Malaysian economy. In this paper we examine the everyday underpinnings and consequences of these domestic worker disputes through an engagement with the literatures on social reproduction and everyday life.

By way of background information, the 2009 dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia led to considerable negotiation between these two states over on what Indonesia viewed as inadequacies in the terms on which its workers enter Malaysia under the existing MOU (for example, there were no guarantees of rest days or minimum rates of pay). In May 2011, with a view to ending the freeze on official flows of domestic workers from Indonesia, a new MOU was agreed and signed. However, despite stipulations in the MOU that rates of pay be set by 'market forces' Indonesia continued to press for an increase in the minimum monthly rate of rate of pay. By mid-2012, only very small numbers of Indonesian domestic workers had entered Malaysia under the new MOU. The dispute has been further complicated by the 2012 announcement by Indonesia that it was planning to end formal systems for return migration by unskilled workers by 2017 (i.e. workers classified as unskilled such as domestic workers will no longer be able to access legal routes for employment overseas). In the dispute

with Cambodia, where there was no MOU, it quickly became apparent that Cambodian private sector recruitment agencies were able to operate with complete disregard for the (inadequate) labour regulations that governed this sector leading to significant abuses against workers in training centres and in the transit phase, and leaving workers especially vulnerable to abuses once in Malaysia (Holliday, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2011).

The specific details of the negotiations and disputes between these states are not the focus of this paper¹. Rather we take these transnational labour disputes as a starting point for a discussion of the everyday political economy of socially reproductive labour that constitutes the conditions of possibility within which bilateral disputes and labour agreements between Southeast Asian states take shape. At the core of this analysis is a concern to highlight how migrant domestic labour is a form of socially reproductive labour, which, despite being paid for, is persistently under-valued due to regulatory and cultural practices that construct domestic labour as ‘non-work’. We find the literature on social reproduction to be of particular significance to our analysis given the way in which it has sought to bring together a concern with the everyday of ‘life’s work’ (Mitchell, Marston and Katz, 2003) with an analysis of the overarching political economic regulatory shifts that sustain broader regimes of social reproduction and capital accumulation more generally (Bakker 2007). Recent writings have also emphasised how social reproduction itself has very much ‘gone global’—drawing households into transnationalized webs of socially reproductive relations that serve to reconfigure care relations in both state that predominately host migrant domestic workers and states that send large numbers of domestic workers abroad (‘host’ and ‘sender; states) (Safri and Graham, 2010; Elias and Gunawardana, 2013). The rescaling of the household in this manner is a crucial component of the disputes over transnational domestic work in Southeast Asia—underlining both the reliance of many middle class households on

migrant labour and the significant role of remittances to household survival strategies especially in poor rural areas.

It is notable that the rescaling of the household into the ‘global household’ (Safri and Graham, 2010) is not matched by a greater recognition of, or value placed upon, the work that goes on within households. Rather, deeply exploitative practices of labour exportation and control serve to produce understandings of domestic workers as mere export commodities. It is argued here that these practices are the outcome of particular dynamics in which the labour migration and employment system not only reproduces but also sustains, and even invigorates, wider structures of inequality. Thus we seek to identify three overlapping processes at work that underpin the production of regimes for domestic worker migration between these three countries: (a) the relationship between spatially produced inequalities across national boundaries and migration as illustrated via the example of remittance economies; (b) the ideological production of domestic space—discussed in terms of the association between employment of domestic workers and middle class status; and (c) the production of migrant domestic worker subjectivities—by state and private actors and frequently resisted by workers themselves. Such an approach leads us to bring our feminist political economy approach into conversation with broad body of work on the everyday that has emphasized (amongst other things) the governance and/or disciplining of everyday life (Lefebvre 1991; Foucault 1980; de Certeau 1984 [1980]). Furthermore, in seeking to capture something of the ‘everydayness’ of these dynamics, we have sought to look to as wide a range of sources as possible—including looking to the realm of popular culture (especially works of fiction), media stories-and existing ethnographic accounts. Although we also draw upon more ‘conventional’ resources— such as government reports, interviews etc,— we feel that the incorporation of this less conventional material is necessitated by the turn towards the

everyday. The realm of popular culture in particular, we find, provides additional insights into everyday life that may not be otherwise captured (see e.g. Martin 2014). However, we remain committed to the view that the everyday cannot be studied as a sphere in isolation from broader political economic shifts and regulatory transformations. This is a perspective that certainly chimes with both feminist literature on social reproduction as well as accounts of the everyday within IPE (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007; Elias and Rethel 2016).

This article is structured as follows: we open with an account of what a feminist everyday approach to political economy brings to the study of migrant domestic labour regimes. We then move to consider the under examined socially reproductive arrangements that underpin the labour disputes that have occurred between Malaysia, Indonesia and Cambodia. On the one hand, we explore the gendered political economy of remittances in Indonesia and Cambodia. On the other we look at the cultural processes and practices at work in the production of the middle-class Malaysian household – emphasising both the roles of social reproduction and cultures of domesticity that underpin the Malaysian modernity project. The final section focuses much more on issues of subjectification and governmentality—but also, importantly, points to questions of everyday agency (be it that of labour recruiters, workers or households) and its role in the active construction of markets for migrant domestic work and the modes of resistance that are possible.

Domestic Work and Everyday Life in Southeast Asia

One way of presenting the domestic labour disputes between Malaysia, Indonesia and Cambodia is to emphasise how a group of non-elite actors (domestic workers) emerged as a

major bilateral issue between these states. It should be noted however that it is our intention to avoid a purely actor-centric account of the everyday political economy—i.e. one centred solely on the presentation of the voices and/or resistance strategies of migrant domestic workers and/or their civil society allies (see for example Ford and Piper 2007). In contrast to this more agent-centric approach, we ground our analysis within an understanding of everyday life in which agency *does* matter but is not the *only* marker of what constitutes ‘everydayness’. In this sense then our article serves to disrupt the division that Hobson and Seabrooke (2009) describe between two strands of the literature on the everyday in international political economy—one, informed by the writings of scholars such as James C. Scott (1987) that remains focussed on questions of everyday agency as forms of political action (Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007, 2009; Broome, 2014) and another, that seeks to understand, the production and governance of everyday life (e.g. Amoore 2002; Langley 2009). Furthermore, our approach is one that seeks to analyse and to value the mundane practices and minutiae of everyday life (Enloe, 2013: 48). For example, a recent critical essay by Davies (2014) emphasises the need to bring back notions of ‘everydayness’ into everyday political economy analysis. That is, to look beyond the exercise of (oftentimes extraordinary) acts of agency in favour of an understanding of everyday life as it is experienced on a daily basis—characterised by daily rhythms and routines (see, in particular, the work of Lefebvre, 2004[1992]).

It should be noted that for many feminist writers, the deployment of the concept of the everyday in Lefebvre’s writings is viewed as problematic—notably, in terms of his characterization of the household as a site of innately feminized activities². Rather than completely reject Lefebvre’s writings on the everyday, however, Felski (2000) suggests that the practices of everyday life within households should be re-situated within feminist understandings of how everyday practices serve to *produce* gender. This is a view that we

find particularly useful—one that does not see the household as an unchanging site of fixed gender identities, but points to the space of the household as a key site for the production of gender roles and identities. Thus our article leans towards a sympathetic take on Lefebvre's writings. This includes engaging with his work on the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991)—how this 'has always been political and strategic' and moreover 'filled with ideologies' (Lefebvre, 1976, p. 30-1). Thus we suggest that there is a need to recognise the ideological production of household space and how this is sustained via scalar hierarchies—hierarchies that render socially reproductive work centred on the household (and, indeed, the body itself) invisible (Marston and Smith, 2001; Bakker, 2007).

Nonetheless, we do not want to suggest that the household is some sort of unchanging site of the everyday political economy; a place of endless repetition and routine. In our case, routines of everyday life are challenged and transformed by the presence (and then, the sudden absence) of migrant domestic labour, whilst migrant domestic labourers themselves engage in a multiplicity of householding strategies (be it remittance sending or forms of long distance mothering) that serve to reconfigure household relations in the sites that they have temporarily left behind. Thus households must be understood as sites of transformation and change, changes that often rub up against dominant ideological formations regarding the appropriate role and position of different groups of women within the household.

In what follows, the discussion turns to focus on the productive-socially reproductive arrangements that underpin domestic worker disputes in Southeast Asia. A focus on social reproduction is one that we find especially useful in terms of considering how migrant domestic work comes to matter to broader economic policy agendas (concerning development, poverty alleviation and supporting women's labour force participation). But

perhaps more importantly a focus on social reproduction also provides insights into how migrant domestic work is understood within employing households—in other words, it gives us a conceptual language through which to understand the everyday practices of increasingly transnationalized households.

Producing Migrant Domestic Work in Indonesia and Cambodia

A focus those socially reproductive activities that take shape within households brings to light important gendered assumptions that underpin the development of formalized/ing systems of return migration in Southeast Asia. In this section, we focus on the sender countries—Indonesia and Cambodia—in order to examine the remittance economies that have emerged around the growth of this highly feminized area of employment. In doing so, it is important to recognise that an understanding of these remittance economies must take account of the extremely adverse terms upon which women enter into migrant domestic work. Specifically, the emergence of domestic workers as one of the largest and most feminized migratory flows in the Southeast Asian region reflects spatially organized patterns of poverty and inequality across the region (not just across states but often, more importantly, within states). Remittances do, of course, constitute an important source of foreign exchange in much of the developing world and writings on the migration-development nexus emphasise the positive impacts that remittances bring to both states and individual households. However, more nuanced, in depth, analyses of remittances tend to highlight the fairly minimal impact of remittances on household poverty levels (Painduri and Thangavelu, 2008) and point to the wider social costs associated with having household members working overseas (Parreñas, 2005). Research on remittances has also pointed to their role in the reconfiguration and

transformation of household relationships—not least in terms of how the rapid growth in temporary labour migration regimes is leading to the emergence of forms of ‘global householding’ (Douglass, 2009) that significantly challenge the way in which we understand both the dynamics of household life and the nature of social reproduction. Thus, for migrants, the ‘space’ of the household comes to be stretched across national boundaries – migrants are bound to their households ‘back home’ via financial ties (Safri and Graham 2010) and also their continued involvement in its social reproduction through advances in communications technology – what has been referred to as ‘transnational hyper-maternalism’ (Tungohan 2013).

Research on the gendered impacts of migration not only points to the reconfigured household relations and daily practices that stem from the increased reliance of poor households on remittances but has also looked at the gendered logics and assumptions that underpin this social transformation. As Kunz (2010) argues, there is a persistent failure by International Financial Institutions to recognise how remittance flows are gendered beyond some rather dubious assertions concerning how women are more reliable (even ‘rational’) economic subjects who are more likely to remit a higher proportion of savings and, when they are ‘left behind’, are better able to manage household finances. States in Southeast Asia have tended to echo these ‘heroic’ narratives concerning women’s contribution to remittance flows (Gibson Law and McKay, 2001)— a trope that tends to be reproduced within the domestic worker recruitment industry itself.

Outward migration was, and continues, to be seen in both Indonesia and Cambodia as a mechanism to alleviate the negative impact of high levels of unemployment, especially in rural areas. In the Indonesian case, the 1997 financial crisis hit the country especially hard

and, intersecting with increased demand for female migrants in wealthier states to work in both care-related and manufacturing employment, saw huge numbers of rural women migrants leave the country on temporary employment contracts. By 2007, women made up 79 per cent of Indonesian contract workers deployed overseas with most of these women taking up employment as domestic workers (Bank of Indonesia 2010). Invariably, wages remitted by migrants play an important role in Indonesia's attempts to ensure economic stability and development. It needs to be noted, however, that Indonesia is not a country overwhelmingly dependent on migrant worker remittances (Hugo, 2008, p. 51; Bank of Indonesia 2010). Cambodia too is not a remittance dependent state—remittances in Cambodia are still quite low at 3% of GDP in 2009 (Holliday, 2012)).

Nonetheless, both states have sought to enact policies and systems that aim to encourage overseas migration in order to bring in foreign exchange and to alleviate poverty. In Indonesia for example, it is significant that since 2005 worker remittances have been higher than inflows of official development aid. Furthermore, there is a spatial organisation of migration at work with certain, largely impoverished, regions of the Indonesian archipelago overwhelmingly dependent on migrant remittances. In Cambodia, the government actively encourages migration as a means to combat poverty, alleviate unemployment and bring in foreign earnings (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2010). The global financial crisis compounded the situation with the highly feminized garment manufacturing industry, Cambodia's single largest export industry, being forced to lay off 10% of its workforce: representative of some 30,000 job losses (World Bank, 2009). Migration, then, becomes an attractive 'choice' for individuals experiencing economic hardship (and the decision to migrate is frequently influenced by enticements from agencies or brokers that might include bags of rice, cattle or cash loans (Human Rights Watch, 2011)) and it presents an opportunity for a state looking for

solutions to a range of economic and social problems (including poverty and social discontent). Unsurprisingly, remittances in Cambodia have increased dramatically from the early 2000s, more than doubling from the 2003 figure of US\$138 million to US\$335million in 2009 (World Bank, 2013).

Thus the expansion of Malaysia's market for low cost domestic work is dependent upon a particular spatial organisation of labour whereby groups of economically marginalized women living in some of the poorest, usually rural, parts of Southeast Asia are drawn into the market economy. This spatial organisation is one of the main mechanisms through which poor women come to be adversely incorporated into the market for domestic work and intersects with popular portrayals in Malaysia of Indonesian and Cambodian domestic workers as simple rural 'girls' struggling to cope in the modern urban Malaysian household environment. We now turn to examine these Malaysian households, drawing attention in particular to the role that domestic workers play in shoring up not just middle class Malaysian women's ability to engage in the formal economy, but also a vision of middle class domestic well-being that underpins the Malaysian modernity project.

Domestic Work and the Production of Domestic Space in Malaysia

The demand for low cost foreign domestic workers has emerged as a core feature of the dynamic transformation of social reproduction within several middle- to high-income Asian economies such as Malaysia. Given the patchy availability of childcare and elderly care services, migrant domestic labour is conventionally viewed as playing an important role in meeting the socially reproductive needs of middle class Malaysian citizens and ultimately,

boosting the participation of educated Malaysian women in the formal labour market (Elias, 2011). The deeply exploitative nature of this policy solution has, however, been well documented (Human Rights Watch 2004, 2011). Domestic workers are employed directly by households with their work permit tied to their employer and their freedom of movement restricted. They are subject to high levels of control and surveillance by employers, are not granted rest days, and frequently experience difficulties such as the non/under payment of wages or are expected to perform additional household labour for employers' friends or neighbours.

The rise of migrant domestic worker employment in Malaysia should not be seen simply in terms of the pressures on households that stem from women's participation in the formal labour market. As Chin's work makes clear, employment of domestic workers also serves as a significant marker of social status (Chin, 1998). Cultures of domesticity, themselves often an outcome of a particular vision of modernity (Stivens, 1998), intersect with the desires of a consumerist and aspirational urban middle class fuelling the demand for paid domestic work. Intimate practices of labouring *inside* the home are thus similar to practices of consumption or production that take place *outside* of the home in terms of their role in the production of class subjectivities. Not only are domestic workers, marked as different to their middle class employers on the basis of their race and nationality, but their subordinate status within the household is also underscored by their association with the 'domestic' and the 'intimate'. An ongoing 'commodification of intimacy' (Boris and Parreñas, 2010)—that is, the rise of affective forms of labour that appear to further marketize skills and behaviours traditionally associated with everyday domestic life—is thus characterized by the reproduction of gendered and class based inequalities and hierarchies within the home.

Even with the 2009-11 ban in place, Indonesian women continued to dominate this sector of employment and workers were still able to arrive into Malaysia on short stay visas which could be converted into work visas. Nonetheless, the imposition of the moratorium did lead to significant labour shortages. Malaysian maid agencies suggested that domestic worker arrivals fell from around 1,000 per month prior to the ban to just 200 per month by January 2011 leading to a situation in which up to 35,000 Malaysian families were awaiting domestic workers, with ‘waiting list’ times averaging seven months (AsiaOneNews, 2011). Given the association of class status and employment of domestic workers, it is interesting that the ‘maid shortage’ has produced wider anxieties about future economic decline. Malaysia’s economic growth from the early 1970s onwards propelled the country into what, in 1993, the World Bank called the High Performing Asian Economies (World Bank, 1993). In more recent years, however, concerns have been raised regarding the ‘stalling’ of economic growth in Malaysia (Henderson and Phillips, 2007) prompting fears that the economy has become ‘stuck’ in a middle-income trap (Hill, Yean and Zin, 2012; Cherif and Hasanov, 2015). Interestingly, the need to increase (especially middle class) women’s engagement in the formal economy is frequently emphasized by government planners and policy-makers as a policy-solution that will deliver successful and sustained competitive economic growth (Elias, 2011).

One example of this comes from a dystopian vision of Malaysia in the year 2020 published by a popular online alternative Malaysian media outlet. In this account, Malaysia’s economic decline is contrasted with that of a, by then, prosperous (and democratic) Indonesia which is now importing domestic workers from Malaysia:

As Siti walked pass [*sic*] the huge poster recruiting Malaysian maids for Indonesia she wondered what went wrong. “We voted for BN³, we believed their promises of high income but now we can barely survive with the stagnant income and ever increasing cost of living, she thought bitterly... It is the year 2020⁴ and Tun Mahathir had just flagged off the first batch of Malaysian maids for Indonesia. There is no lack of eager women willing to take on domestic drudgery in a foreign land to escape the poverty in rural Malaysia. Reports of maids horrifically abused in Jakarta did not faze them. They are able to earn twice what a teacher earns and save most of it. Indonesia had progressed fast in the last decade and outstripped Malaysia in economic performance and income while Malaysia went backwards. (Gan 2012)

In the short story ‘MH72’, the Malaysian writer Krish Ram (2012) presents a similarly dystopian perspective in which the collapse of the Malaysian economy under their weight of a housing bubble leads to an educated middle class Malaysian woman ‘Susan’ having to take up employment as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. The character of Susan, the stay at home highly-educated wife and mother, is reflective of how women have come to play a symbolic role the production a specifically Malaysian modernity – the trappings of which include employment of an Indonesian domestic servant (Chin, 1998). The character’s lifestyle quickly falls apart when her husband loses his job and the bills pile up (reflective of the rising concerns about levels of household indebtedness discussed by Rethel (2015)). Susan desperately clings to her perceived class status (flying on Malaysian airlines to Hong Kong rather than a budget airline), and yet as she reflects on her situation at the airport she becomes acutely aware of how her status as a middle class Malaysian woman had been dependent on the exploitation of domestic workers:

It was only three years ago that she had had her own live-in Indonesian maid in Bukit Damansara. She remembers how she had complained to her neighbour when her husband took the maid to Pantai Hospital for treatment when she collapsed suddenly.

“No need to waste so much money, mah,” she had told Mrs Khoo. “She’s only a servant, what?”

She, suddenly, stops in her tracks. “Oh my God; what if they beat me?” (Ram, 2012)

These stories point to one of the many ways in which the production of modern, competitive Malaysia is contested via counter narratives in which the economic insecurities of the middle classes emerge in highly gendered terms. Nonetheless, more mainstream press coverage takes a somewhat different position, reassuring Malaysians by pointing to examples from Western states that *not* having domestic workers is in itself a form of modern living (whilst conveniently ignoring the inadequacies of the Malaysian welfare system in making this comparison). Not employing domestic workers is instead presented as ‘the new middle class reality’ (Lau and Koh, 2012). The semi-official *New Straits Times* stated in a front page editorial that ‘[a]fter nearly three years of a supply cut of Indonesian domestic workers...one would have thought Malaysians would accept the reality by now: Indonesian maids are not coming anymore... Stop day dreaming, live in reality and find some other solutions’ (cited in Kuppusamy, 2012). Middle-class Malaysian households are thus encouraged to do their own housework and to use private childcare centres and to invest in labour saving electronic devices such as dishwashers and robotic vacuum cleaners (Ahmad, 2011; Unni, 2014). Indeed, in early 2015 Malaysian and Indonesian press covered a story concerning how a Malaysian Robotic Vacuum cleaner was being marketed with the tag-line ‘Fire Your Indonesian Maid Now’ leading to official complaints by the Indonesian government to the Malaysian Foreign Ministry (Jakarta Globe, 2015).

A turn to robots to solve an ongoing crisis in socially reproductive labouring is in many ways the stuff of science fiction—and this issue re-emerges in interesting ways in newly emerging Malaysian science fiction writing. The projection of future anxieties into Science Fiction imaginings is clearly at work within these texts. Indeed, we would argue that such imaginings constitute a part of the social production of spaces of everyday life – an everyday in which the tensions over social reproductive labour are starkly revealed. Thus in the short story ‘What the Andromaid reads at night’ (Mahsun, 2015), the same anxieties over debt, the rise of regional competitors such as China, and the lack of state support for socially reproductive labour emerge as themes in the text. Raminah, a working mother, takes out a bank-loan to purchase a ‘Modern Home Management Automaton’ who she names MAT: ‘When she had unboxed MAT, she had noticed a little plaque fastened on its rear outer casing above the power switch which announced proudly that it was “Designed in Malaysia”. Below that was printed in much smaller letters “Made in Indonesia”’. Although Raminah and her children develop strong bonds of friendship with MAT, she is acutely aware that the Indonesian-Malaysian robots are somewhat inferior to the expensive ‘maintenance free’ ‘smart, loyal and efficient’ Chinese models.

But even in the face of this current ‘new middle class reality’ in which migrant domestic workers are no longer willing to either come to Malaysia or to work for such low wages, what remains unchanged is that the market for migrant domestic work rests, fundamentally, on the state’s non-recognition of domestic work as work. Domestic workers are mere ‘helpers’ and have no access to formal labour rights under the terms of Malaysia’s 1955 Employment Act and hence are not regarded as requiring the higher wages and benefits available to other workers. Invariably then, efforts by the Malaysian women’s ministry to create ‘household manager’ positions (*New Straits Times*, 2011) through training schemes met with little success. Despite the effort to rebrand and ‘professionalise’ domestic work, these initiatives

are structurally constrained by both the official non-recognition of domestic work as work and the impact of state policies that have institutionalized a system of employment that ensures that this low wage, low status work is performed by non-citizen others. The idea that this is a form of work that might be performed by anyone other than non-citizens has become firmly entrenched in Malaysian visions of modernity. Indeed, just as ‘MAT’, the andromaid, is made in Indonesia, so too is Lakshi, the android protagonist in another short story: ‘Kakak’. Reflective of the racial ordering at work within domestic worker migration regimes, the Lakshi is abused by her employer not simply because she is android, but because she has been imported into Malaysia from Indonesia:

You see! This is what happens when you buy an android from Indonesia!” she cursed once when Lakshi failed to clean up on time after her battery level fell to critical. “Full of mistakes, that’s why you are so cheap. Think that just because you are a robot means no need to get scolded, is it? (Liang, 2015, p. 103)

And yet, the possible collapse of this system in the face of the ongoing embargo has not as yet forced the Malaysian government to address some very thorny issues in relation to inadequacies in the provision of child and elderly care and in systems of maternity leave (Elias 2011), with the widespread assumption in place that arrivals of Indonesian domestic workers are immanent or can be easily replaced by other low wage groups of workers from the region. The 24 year jail sentence handed down to a Malaysian couple whose starving to death of their maid sparked much of the initial uproar in Cambodia has perhaps illustrated a greater willingness by the Malaysian government to prosecute crimes against domestic workers. Yet the judge’s comments at sentencing probably represent an uglier truth. The judge warned Malaysians not to create a bad image for the country by abusing ‘maids’, before surmising that should households face particular problems with a domestic worker ‘you can send them back’ (Kaur, 2013). Domestic workers thus become something of a ‘disposable’

commodity—a construction that also fits rather neatly with a broader representation of handling risk and diversification when sourcing commodities (see also Gunawardana this volume on the issue of ‘disposability’). Indeed, it is an issue that in the lead up to the most recent Malaysian elections became an issue of national importance (Hunt, 2012). As part of a Malaysian delegation to discuss deeper economic ties with Myanmar, Prime Minister Najib Razak stated that domestic workers could be sourced from Myanmar, declaring that: ‘They are an industrious and polite people. I think they could fit in culturally with the Malaysian setting. I don't think there will be that great a difficulty’ (*New Straits Times*, 2012). It would seem that the sourcing domestic workers has become the fare of trade delegations.

Everyday Actors and Return Migration Systems

Nonetheless, as the discussion in this section will illustrate, sourcing the ‘right sort’ of domestic worker has become an issue to be resolved by (usually state-sanctioned) market actors—recruitment agents. In this final section we return to examine how the everyday practices of the actors located within return migration systems serve to reproduce the structures of inequality and disadvantage in ways that limit, but at the same time do not completely obscure, the possibilities for resistance by migrant domestic workers themselves. Such an analysis is important because whereas the other sections of this paper have brought social reproduction and the household more clearly into view, this section serves to place the very bodies of domestic workers more centrally within the analysis.

We place particular significance on the role of recruitment agents and broker networks as central components of the everyday politics of migration⁵ – regulating and constructing the ideal worker-subject. As Liang (2011) points out, recruitment agencies play a significant role

in creating the image of the ‘ideal maid’ and, in the process, construct women as submissive, docile non-citizen workers. Such practices might best be conceptualized in relation to how discourses of the ‘good’ or ‘ideal’ maid serve to create appropriate worker subjectivities and as well as reproduce national boundaries. For example, prior to the Cambodian ban, pictures appeared in the Malaysian media showing Cambodian women undergoing ‘training’ in order to take up employment as domestic workers in Malaysia (Hariati and Fong, 2010). The pictures show a group of Cambodian women clad in matching yellow T-shirts cradling baby dolls and receiving cooking lessons in a domestic worker training facility (similar media images can also be found of Indonesian women prior to the Indonesian moratorium). Such images not only serve to justify the exorbitant ‘training fees’ charged by agencies, they also perpetuate ideas that the kind of women taking up employment as domestic workers lack any kind of marketizable skills *whatsoever*—even those skills that would be part of their everyday gendered household responsibilities—and thus construct certain groups of migrant women as deeply unskilled and not deserving of higher rates of pay.

Thus as Rodriguez and Schwenken (2013) argue, whilst regularized system of return migration exist *because* of agreements between states, a state-centric (or regulatory) perspective is inadequate in understanding how and why ideal migrant subjects are produced and contested. Calling for a focus on ‘wider societal practices’, the authors suggest

The production of migrant subjects is multidirectional and diffuse. Private business actors such as recruiters, employers or money lenders, state agencies, non-governmental organisations, and, last but not least, the migrants themselves engage in a wide array of disciplinary and regulatory techniques of forming ideal migrants for different ends.

These subject positions are gendered, both in terms of masculinities as well as

femininities, and racialized. They speak to local conditions as well as to global expectations about ‘good migrants (Rodriguez and Schwenken, 2013, p. 376)

These local and global expectations concerning the ‘good migrant’ are evident in deeply commodified understanding of the foreign domestic worker that serve to deflect attention away from the unethical and oftentimes corrupt practices that agencies engage in. For example, Human Rights Watch (2011) recount instances of Cambodian women having to pay large sums of money or hand over land titles to agents in order to leave training centres even for short periods. Furthermore, a central component of the efforts to regularise and manage return migration for domestic workers has been the reproduction of an anti-trafficking ‘rescue’ narrative whereby potential migrants are continually warned of the dangers of making the journey overseas in terms of the risk of being trafficked into sex-work (Killias, 2010). Especially in Cambodia, this is deeply problematic given the extremely legally and ethically dubious practices that have characterized the operations of recruitment agents (Hing, Pide and Dallas, 2011). These ‘rescue narratives’ serve to further legitimize the activities of legal migration brokers and agencies—as those actors best able to offer advice and protection to vulnerable groups of women.

Numerous studies of Southeast Asian domestic workers do, of course, point to the everyday acts of agency and resistance that workers engage in—a literature that counters the view that domestic workers are the voiceless victims of a patriarchal capitalist system (Yeoh and Huang, 1998; Arnado, 2010). As Rodriguez and Schwenken (2013, p. 376) suggest these resistances (presented in Scott’s terms as ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990)) ‘point to the ways that there is overall contestation of the rise in temporary labour migration programmes’. One of the most interesting studies, by Killias (2010), demonstrates that when domestic workers

run away from their Malaysian employers, in spite of the fact that they face certain insecurities that stem from their undocumented status, this can also be understood as a mode of resistance that enables workers to break free of state-sanctioned migration schemes and acquire better paying, higher status work⁶. Unsurprisingly in the Cambodian context there is considerable distrust of recruitment agencies who have themselves emerged as key perpetrators of abuses; (potential) recruits often cite a preference to join the illegal migration flows instead of pursuing government sanctioned routes (Holliday, 2011)⁷. These accounts are important not simply in terms of how we think about the ways in which state control over the lives of migrant workers is reproduced and how this is resisted at the level of the everyday, but also because they draw attention to the way in which the distinctions between formal and informal migratory systems are frequently overemphasized. After all, both operate within the context of global inequalities that render the unskilled migrant particularly powerless. There is a very blurry line between documented and undocumented migration into Malaysia—a line that has blurred further as the Malaysian government and recruitment agencies have sought out ways to circumvent the impact of the freeze on new arrivals of domestic workers from Indonesia and Cambodia. Insecurities for migrant domestic workers are thus produced largely by state attempts to regularize the market for domestic work in order to meet development objectives. As an example, during the dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia, the Indonesian Embassy in Malaysia sought to push the Indonesian government to end the domestic worker ban on the grounds that domestic workers are even more vulnerable to abuse when they are employed through informal arrangements. However, this is a position that overlooks the multiple vulnerabilities that migrant domestic workers face within regularized systems of employment that function outside of national labour laws.

Conclusion

The emergence of regulatory migration regimes and disputes over migrant domestic work take shape within the context of a transnationalization of social relations of reproduction. On the one hand, this is reflected in terms of the emergence of ‘global households’ (Safri and Graham, 2010)—often poor households in which one or more member has migrated but continues to send money back. But on the other hand, it is also a reflection of the ways through which states with large middle class populations, such as Malaysia, seek to plug gaps in welfare state provisioning and provide the perceived domestic labour needs of an ever growing and aspirational middle class. A focus on social reproduction then provides important insights into the mechanisms through which the everyday is transformed and marketized—how arenas of social life such as the household previously viewed as marginal to the functioning of the global economy have come to be seen as new sites for the ever widening and deepening of the market economy.

This paper has sought to analyse the links between global migration regimes and social reproductive arrangements, and experiences and practices of domestic labouring within households. We examine several dimensions of migration for domestic work in Southeast Asia in ways that brings together literatures on everyday life, social reproduction and the production of space. Thus migration and social reproduction are connected via (a) strategies to boost remittances and flows of workers from some of the most impoverished parts of Southeast Asia, and (b) efforts to produce and sustain the Malaysian economic success story (which includes, affluent middle class living). These connections are, in turn, sustained by the day-to-day production of ‘good’ worker subjects—a process that is, nonetheless, actively and constantly resisted by workers themselves. This article presents everyday life and a messy and

theoretically complex place. Thus rhythms and routines of domestic life are shown to be constantly in flux as household members migrate, or as middle class households fail to secure the employment of domestic workers—and yet there is a certain stability to how household labour is consistently seen as lacking in value, pointing to the role of gender inequality in sustaining the ideological production of household space. It is our contention that through an understanding of the everyday as a site of socially reproductive labour, we are perhaps best able to understand the many and varied processes and tensions at work within Southeast Asia's disputes over migrant domestic work.

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Notes

¹ For such a discussion see Elias (2013) Holliday (2012) Khadijah and Shakila (2012)

² Thus the 'modern women' is portrayed as trapped and unreflective – as in 'control of production, of the household, children's education, social and cultural life, romance and love' (1995, p. 153) and little else. See also Olsen (2011) Green (2012).

³ *Barisan Nasional* – the ruling coalition of parties that has been in power since Malaysia gained independence.

⁴ The year 2020 has a symbolic importance in Malaysian politics and policy making. It being the date that former PM Mahathir Mohammed promised that the country would attain developed country status by and the date continues to loom large in state development plans, documents and ministerial announcements.

⁵ The limits of viewing migration as a simplistic state-to-state transfer of people regulated via some sort of bilateral arrangement or MOU is emphasised by Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh (2011) who point to the significance of broker networks which operate not entirely externally to the state.

⁶ This issue about the relationship between state action (in this case the establishment of state sanctioned migratory schemes) and the willingness of migrants to avoid the state by shedding their legal identity and becoming 'undocumented' is also found in other areas of the migration studies literature. See e.g. Ellermann (2010)

⁷ In interview, the IOM for example suggested that almost all domestic worker migration to Malaysia had gone via informal/unofficial routes (personal interview (Louth) Consultant, International Organization for Migration (IOM) Cambodia, interviewed in Phnom Penh, March 7, 2014) a reflection both of the poor capacity of the state to actually regulate domestic worker flows as well as an overall lack of trust in state institutions.